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ABSTRACT

Research indicates that students need to improve their critical thinking skills, but many students miss the opportunity to do so by not reading and analyzing their textbooks closely enough. Often, students believe that textbooks are objective materials full of "facts" that must be memorized, understood, and given back to the instructor, rather than subjective materials based on particular points of view. To combat this problem, a professor at a midwestern university developed a method for increasing critical thinking skills among basic writers by using textbook journals. Students were required to note ideas in the margins of their books as they read, and then write journal entries from the marginalia. A content analysis of their remarks over the course of a semester indicated that paying greater attention to details of what the author said made students more aware of what they disagreed with, did not understand, liked, or disliked about what they read. Some made insightful comments about the slim difference between argumentative and informative essays, or how material in the textbook was presented. Almost all said they felt their critical thinking skills had improved and that they could better defend their own ideas as a result. Textbook journals appear to be a promising strategy, and may be suitable for a writing across the curriculum program. (Samples of student comments are included.) (JC)

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Initiating Students Into Critical Thinking, Reading, and Writing About Texts

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My main purposes in this paper are 1) to describe an approach that helps initiate students into critical thinking, reading, and writing about texts and 2) to report some findings from a content analysis of textbook journals and from some measures of student perceptions of their critical thinking, their textbook, and the textbook journal. Writing courses that are based on sound theory and rhetorical principles and that use textbooks reflecting that theory and these principles have a content. They teach content as well as skills, and students can learn rhetoric/ composition content-specific critical thinking, reading, and writing skills. Writing teachers using theory-based/research-based textbooks can use textbook journals not only to help students learn the content but also to help them learn how to think, read, and write critically about the content and the presentation of the content.

The new buzzwords in academia are "critical thinking." Critical thinking is a hot topic as evidenced by the growing number of conferences, popular and scholarly articles and books, programs and courses devoted to critical thinking. Underlying this new movement of focusing on higher level thinking skills is an implicit criticism of traditional classroom practices. Critics are complaining that "our education system is dominated by teachers who have become technicians delivering prescribed curriculums and by students who see learning as a sequence of factual lessons" (Black, cited by Russel, 1986). Professors report that they no longer take it for granted that students can 1) analyze arguments, 2) reason carefully about issues and texts, and 3) see texts as being subjective documents by the time they reach college. As a result, faculty members, including those who teach composition, are becoming involved in trying to help students learn how to think.

However, controversy surrounds the topic "Critical Thinking and the Teaching of Writing." Some argue that general critical thinking programs or courses won't work. They argue that the programs now being advocated from coast to coast are ineffective in producing students who can think (and write) critically in all their other courses because what is taught and learned in general critical thinking courses doesn't transfer (Williams, 1985; Adler, 1986). Others believe that students cannot think or write critically about topics unless they are experts on the topic and have a large, complex knowledge base (Pearson, 1984) or unless they have reached a certain developmental stage (Newsweek, 1986). Adler promotes coaching (rather than teaching) critical thinking skills in all courses: the acts of mind such as judging, reasoning, problem-solving, arguing, and defending or rejecting conclusions--acts of mind that are involved in reading, writing, discussing, speaking, listening, calculating, proving, testing, observing, etc.

Williams (1985) argues that teachers who teach critical thinking must be masters of the unspoken framework of their disciplines. Kurland (1986) agrees that reliance on generalized approaches to the teaching/learning of critical thinking are not enough, especially in the developmental context in which students have not reached the intuitive awareness exhibited by other students. Kurland points out that in his developmental classes, the problem was not one of critical thinking in general (his students could analyze films and real-world situations well), or of the general need for carefully considered and reflective reading and writing habits, but of an initiation into critical thinking about texts. His task was to alter how his students perceived a text, from an initial assumption of an objective associated with literal understanding and student responses involving restatement, paraphrases, or summaries to the perception of a text as a subjective document conveying

perceptions and discussions of values, assumptions, perspectives, and underlying meanings and messages.

Clearly, while many faculty members readily admit the need to improve students' thinking abilities, they do not agree on how to attain this goal. However, because the act of putting words on paper helps students clarify thoughts, informal writing assignments make up a significant portion of many thinking courses. Teachers may assign in-class exercises that require students to freewrite about issues raised in lectures or to explain the way they approach certain problems, in order to help students become aware of what they believe and know or how they solve specific problems. The textbook journal is another informal writing approach that I believe encourages and develops students' critical thinking, engaged textbook reading, and writing fluency. In addition it helps teachers, authors, and publishers make informed instructional decisions, for from reading the textbook journals, they become aware of students' presuppositions, problems, preferences, knowledge, attitudes and feelings concerning reading, writing, and composition textbooks. Finally for those concerned with basic writers it provides rich data about the nature of basic students.

In this approach students read their textbook assignments, making marginal notes as they read and then use these notes as data for textbook journal writing done in or out of class. These past two years have been experimental years for the textbook journal assignment. I have tried the textbook journals with three courses: a regular freshman composition course (using Composing Choices by Daugerty), an intermediate writing-in-the-disciplines course (using Writing in the Arts and Sciences by Maimon, et al.) and a preparatory basic writing course (using either Writing: Brief Edition by Cowan-Neeld or Roughdrafts by Calderonello and Edwards). My goal was to

encourage engaged reading of the textbook because I realized many students do not read their textbooks and yet need to improve their textbook comprehension skills in order to succeed in college. I also wanted to discover more about how students relate to the authors of composition texts and whether this affected their comprehension and attitudes. In addition, and above all, I wanted them to become reflective readers and thinkers about texts, especially composition texts. I wanted to initiate them into the world of critical thinking about texts.

For each reading assignment I asked my students to jot down their thoughts in the margins as they read their assignment. Then during the first ten minutes or so of each class, I asked them to write a structured textbook journal responding to my statements or questions on a textbook journal entry sheet I provided them. I asked for their responses concerning their comprehension problems, the new information they learned, their reactions to the author(s) and the author/reader relationship, their feelings, reflective thoughts, questions, and suggestions for the authors. The students wrote their textbook journals using the notes they had made in the margins and their open textbooks as memory prompts and data. (Examples of the textbook journal entry sheet are in your handout, on pages 1-4).

After the students had written for ten minutes, I picked them up and either picked a few to read immediately, responding to student concerns, confusions, questions, or I read them later and responded to them during the next class period. The journal entries were filled with insights for me as well as for the students. I noticed my students seemed to be thinking and reading actively--raising questions about audience, for example, challenging the authors' assertions and textbook design. They were learning to be critics. Certain patterns emerged. It was predictable (for each textbook and

for composition in general) which concepts basic writers found most troublesome, which textbook features were helpful, and which interfered with understanding. I used the textbook journals to plan my class discussions and writing tasks for the students. The journals were particularly helpful in increasing my understanding the nature of my basic writing students, thus improving my interactions with the students in the classroom and in conferences.

As the first semester progressed, the importance of the textbook journal for textbook authors and publishers became increasingly clear. Authors and publishers rarely, if at all, receive feedback from the students using the textbook, other than the author's own students, perhaps. I realized that the textbook journals could not only help students and me learn, but authors and publishers, too. Textbooks could be improved based on student feedback from the textbook journals. A year ago, in my basic writing class I decided to have the students write a personal experience paper in the form of a letter to the author, sharing their experiences and insights as they read Elizabeth Cowan Neeld's textbook, Writing: Brief Edition. The letters were actually sent to her, and the author responded by writing a letter to me and to the students expressing her gratitude and interest in the students' journal-based letters. The same assignment was given in the second semester. Examples of several of my students' letters can be found in the handout on pages 13-17.

This year, in my basic writing classes, the textbook journals became the data for an evaluative paper, written again in the form of a letter, which was sent to the authors of Roughdraft, Calderonello and Edwards. Again the authors responded to each of the students and to me in letters. I received permission from the authors to send copies of the student letters to the textbook publisher and sent not only copies of the letters but also the

content of the textbook journal, summarized and categorized. As you can see from one senior editor's response on page 17 of the handout, his editors will use the information for re-evaluating their editing decisions in the future.

The textbook journal became a tool for learning--a tool used for student, teacher, author, and publisher learning. Although I could see that my students' learning of the content of the textbook was facilitated by writing the margin notes and textbook journals and that their ten minute writings became easier for them to produce, I was interested in the extent to which they helped improve their critical thinking ability. I was also interested in my students' reactions to the margin notes and textbook journals. I decided to examine the margin notes and journals more precisely in order to determine if I could find any evidence in them that students were thinking critically about composition and their composition textbook. I performed a content analysis of margin notes written during the 1986 Fall Semester and the journals written during the 1987 Spring semester. For the content analyses, I coded the students' comments using fourteen categories based on Kurland's notions of initiating students into thinking critically about texts (1986) and Adler's notions of critical thinking as various acts of the mind (1986). These categories are shown in Table 1 on page 4 of your handout. I later collapsed several categories to make the analyses more manageable.

TABLE 1

CATEGORIES OF CRITICAL THINKING ABOUT TEXTS

1. Seeing the textbook as a subjective document conveying perceptions, discussions of values, author perspectives, and underlying meanings/ messages.

2. Seeing the textbook as an objective document needing literal understanding and associating restatements, paraphrases, and summaries with the document.

3. Challenging another's assertions, generalizations, and conclusions in the textbook.

4. Agreeing with another's assertions, generalizations, and conclusions in the textbook.

5. Evaluating the content of the text positively.

6. Evaluating the content of the text negatively.

7. Evaluating the presentation of the content positively.

8. Evaluating the presentation of the content negatively.

9. Self-evaluations as a reader/writer: strengths and weaknesses.

10. Self-reflections, beliefs, insights/realizations, and presuppositions.

11. Asking questions about the content.

12. Asking questions about the presentation of the content.

13. Asking questions about the author's presuppositions.

14. Asking questions about the consistency/inconsistency of another's assertions and conclusions.

To discover my students' perceptions of the value of the textbook for facilitating their critical thinking, reading, and writing I designed a questionnaire shown on page 9 of your handout. Part I consisted of open-ended questions asking students if the textbook journal helped their reading comprehension, writing ability, and critical thinking ability. Part II consisted of a three-point rating scale asking students to rate the level of their critical thinking in 12 areas (closely corresponding to the 14 categories used for the content analysis) before the semester began and at the end of the semester. Part III consisted of three questions asking about 1) the audience for the textbook journals, 2) whether the student was surprised at what happened during the textbook journal writing and 3) whether the

student would advise professors of other classes in other departments to use textbook journals. In addition, in order to investigate their perceptions of the textbook, students responded to a seven- point bipolar semantic differential rating scale with 17 sets of adjectives and a three-point scale with three questions asking about the extent to which the author/reader closeness and understanding the textbook are related and the ability to understand the text success in the course and the university are related. Examples of these instruments are in your handout as well as figures showing the results of these questionnaires.

Results for Margin Notes

Although I am still analyzing the content of the students' margin notes and textbook journals, certain patterns of findings for critical thinking have emerged my basic writing. Students seemed to see the the textbook as an objective document that they need to understand literally, paraphrase, restate, and summarize. This was true especially at the beginning of the semester, but was more true for some students than for others. This is not surprising since basic writers almost always have reading comprehension problems and are a product of educational institutions that understand reading comprehension to mean extracting the propositional content of a text. Several examples illustrate this orientation toward seeing a text as an objective document.

Topic		Marginalia (copied or paraphrased)
. (Finding and Exploring a Topic)	=	Topic--broad subject area Thesis--grows out of a topic
. (Freewriting)	=	Letting your thought flow
. (Brainstorming)	=	No particular order
. (Shifting Focus)	=	Not staying on topic. Sometimes you

		must shift focus to help readers understand--but go right back
. (text structure)	=	narrative structure, shifting focus, copied structure

However I found evidence in the marginalia that many students were beginning to see the text as a subjective document and to think critically about the content of and presentation of the model essays and about the textbook discussion of them and other writing concepts. They were also evaluating themselves as writers, asking questions of the text, and agreeing and disagreeing with the author's assertions or presentation. The following examples and additional examples on page 5 of your handout illustrate these acts of mind:

Topic		Marginalia
. (Writing Informative Essays)	=	The essays in this chapter seem to convey the writer's personal opinions in some areas. Is there any way to avoid this in an informative essay or is this inevitable? Must it be avoided as much as possible?
. (Writing Informative Essays)	=	Isn't an argumentative essay presented in much the same way as an informative? A writer informs the reader of a point of view. There seems to be a fine line between informative and argumentative aims.
. (Writing Informative Essays)	=	Can't an informative essay sway the reader by presenting facts to make something look good or bad? In other words, if all facts are not presented so that the reader can be fully informed, couldn't the paper be argumentative?
. (Model Informative Essay, "Germs")	=	This seems to be the writer's (Lewis Thomes) own opinion of how germs are perceived.
. (Graffiti essay)	=	I disagree with this essay. There are

many other ways to express.

. (Text Level Problems) = I like the way the author's bring out the errors using paragraph by paragraph examples of problems and then tell why they were made and how to correct them.

Results for Textbook Journals

The content analysis of the textbook journals shows that students cover the same range of acts of mind related to critical thinking as I found in the margin notes. I found few explicit statements concerning the textbook as a subjective document, but this orientation toward a text was suggested in the students' responses that I placed in other categories. I found more explicit statements for seeing the text as an objective document than I did for the category of seeing the text as a subjective document. This can be explained no doubt by my asking them to discuss their reading comprehension problems as well as by their tendency to view the text as an objective document. I was surprised by the number of comments that students made indicating that they did in fact judge, evaluate, and challenge the author's assertions, disagree and agree with what authors said and did in the textbook and by the frequency other acts of the mind used for critical thinking.

I found it difficult to separate the comments for the 12 categories because there is some overlap among the categories. Still, it is possible to find clear cases for most of the 12 categories. Each of the 12 categories is illustrated below by a bracketed example. (More examples are given in the handout on pages 6 and 7).

1. <u>Seeing the textbook as a subjective document conveying perceptions, discussion of values, assumptions, author perspectives, and underlying meanings and messages</u>. [After reading both Charlene's and Pati's drafts, I understand the author's point of view that there are many different

styles of drafting and that each writer must find what is comfortable--what works best for herself.]

2. Seeing the textbook as an objective document needing literal understanding, restating, paraphrasing, and summarizing. [There are main principles that govern pronoun use. Pronouns are substitute words, they stand for something. Pronouns must always have clear referents.]
3. Challenging another's assertions, generalizations, conclusions. [In the first paragraph the author's talk about style in writing. My idea of writing style is completely different from the authors. Writing style to me is the methods used to create a paper--whether a person writes predrafts or roughdrafts first; whether a person has an easy or hard time coming up with ideas or something along that line.]
4. Agreeing with Another's Assertions, Generalizations, Conclusions. [I agree with the author that a writer must "immerse" herself in the issue, but I find that to be true with all papers I've written so far.]
5. Evaluating the content of the text positively. [I agree with the author about how finding small errors such as commas and semicolons can be very difficult at times.] [On page 47 it lists seven intentions a writer may have. That's good. I needed to read that because I'm still not sure what makes a good writer.]
6. Evaluating the content of the text negatively. [There were to many drafts to read in Writing Informative Essays. The first one was interesting to read but the second and third one seemed so closely related. They should be combined in some way.]
7. Evaluating the presentation of the content positively. [I liked the notes as to what the authors thought was good or bad about the sample

writings, as on pages 224-226. This helps me to understand what the author is talking about.]

8. Evaluating the presentation negatively. [The author does not use visuals and for some that may be boring. I need visuals to understand the text.]
9. Self-evaluation as reader/writer. [Voice, stance, and tone are usually difficult parts of a writing project for me. I find myself shifting the "you" voice throughout a writing assignment and not having much consistency. My writing tone is also very inconsistent.]
10. Self-Reflection and Insights. [Chapter 6 explains about personal experience essays. It brought up a lot of points that I had never given much thought to, such as consideration for the reader and so much of yourself has to go down on paper.
11. Asking Questions About the Content. [Did the code words discussion need more explanation, definition, or were they used wrong?]
12. Asking Questions About the Presentation of the Content. [Couldn't the authors use some illustrations to break up the reading a little? I'm falling asleep.]

Based on the sample of 15 textbook journals analyzed so far, the data suggests that this approach does help to initiate students into certain kinds of critical thinking, reading, and writing about texts. The composition textbook used by my basic writers was grounded in rhetorical theory and principles, and thus had a content. My students, I believe, were showing evidence that they had acquired some critical thinking skills specific to the rhetorical/composition content of composition.

They were beginning to see a text as a subjective document although there was less evidence for this ability than for other abilities, probably because my structured questions asked them to identify and discuss their

reading comprehension problems and not specifically ask them to view the text as a subjective document. In addition, there was little evidence students asked questions or commented on the consistency or inconsistence of authors' assertions and denials. Finally, students did not seem to be examining the validity of reasons for making one claim or another about what is true, false, or probable, or weighing evidence pro and con. However, a great deal of evidence indicated students were challenging and agreeing or disagreeing with authors' assertions and generalizations, usually giving reasons and making and defending their own generalizations.

I came to several realizations while doing the content analyses. First, I found that some of my basic writers gave evidence of a wide range of types of critical thinking as reflected in the 12 categories while some students gave evidence of using only a few types. I noticed, too, that my students hedged a great deal in their journals. For instance, Terri qualified her statements with "seems" and Richard softened his remarks with "It might be nice if the authors. . . ." Some students used this tentative softened tone throughout the semester but many moved from tentativeness to emphatic assertiveness. The role relationships changed from that of a submissive student writing to a powerful author to a student writing to an author more his/her equal. Also, many students began using a more precise technical vocabulary. Almost all students began by referring to professional and student model essays as "stories," but by the end of the semester, most were using the term essays. I came to realize, too, that my students' reasons for their challenges, disagreements, and agreements were not based on logical reasoning but rather on their own experiences. Finally, the evidence I found while doing the content analysis led me to believe that my basic writing students had moved to a higher level of analytic reading and

self-reflexibility--they were beginning to acquire a different set of assumptions about the nature of texts and about the nature of their responsibilities as reader and writer.

Results for Questionnaire

On Part I of the Textbook Journal Questionnaire, 90% of the students said the textbook journal task helped them think more critically. Students reported, for instance, that it helped them analyze in depth more, think more about the text, notice more what was said, think critically while trying to comprehend, learn how to critique textbooks, etc. About 60% felt the journal helped them understand the textbook better. According to the students, the journal task made them analyze how they felt about the authors' content, helped them get involved with the book, provided an incentive to read the assignment, and motivated them to try harder to comprehend it and react to it in order to write the journal.

Over 80% felt that the textbook journal improved their writing ability. They responded that the task helped them to: feel more confident, write more fluently and freely, develop speed in conveying thoughts in writing in a limited time, notice an author's mistake, expand on simple written expressions, and deal with and reduce pressure when writing under time limits. Not all students were always positive about the textbook journal task. Some students commented that class discussion helped more, that they couldn't think of anything to write, and that the rushed writing prevented any thought about spelling, mechanics, and usage and planning.

In Part II, I examined the rating scale used to measure the degree of change in 12 different critical thinking activities from beginning to end of the semester. I found some interesting results. My students perceived that they made the most gains in making and defending their own generalizations and

asking and answering questions about the consistency and inconsistency of authors' assertions and denials and the least gains in agreeing and disagreeing (and giving reasons) with the content of the textbooks, probably because they had already acquired this ability to some extent. They indicated they made moderate gains in the other categories. These data are shown in the Figures on pages 10 and 11 in your handout.

In Part III of the questionnaire, I found that the audience for students' journals varied. Over half (60%) said they wrote for a combined audience of themselves, teacher, and textbook authors; about 20% reported they wrote for themselves and 20% for the teacher. All but one student said they surprised themselves with what they wrote in their journals. They were surprised at how their journal writing stimulated new ideas, improved their writing, and improved their ability to write ideas down quickly, and how they were 1) able to keep going in their writing, 2) able to identify and confirm their own writing problems, and 3) able to find quite a bit to disagree with. Sixty percent would advise using the textbook journal in other classes and other departments but 40% would not. The reasons given for not using the textbook journal varied; for example--"all journals are a waste of time, silly;" "they take up too much valuable class time;" "personal daily journals are better;" and "more feedback is needed on the journals."

My plans for using the textbook journal next year will include asking students structured questions that focus on those critical thinking abilities I found to be lacking or weak. I will also experiment with required textbook journals written out of class that are turned in every class period. I will continue to use the journals as a guide for my class discussions and student conferences and as data for a major writing task. In addition, I plan to use selected student textbook journal entries as models of good and critical

thinking abilities, keeping in mind that students may be thinking critically even though they do not give any evidence in their journals. Basic writers writing performance does not always indicate their thinking competency. Despite its limitations, I believe the textbook journal is a promising approach for increasing students' critical thinking skills as well as other kinds of learning. Textbook journals can be used in any discipline-specific course and as part of a writing across the curriculum program.